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ABSTRACT

This book is designed to help people develop an action plan to enhance their situation at work. Part 1 focuses on political behavior at work as a key to advancement. It discusses assessing career setbacks and recovery from them. Subsequent sections focus on the following areas of self-study that are necessary to enable the individual to manage office politics: (1) interpersonal relationships; (2) thinking politically; (3) the grapevine; (4) competition among work colleagues; (5) appropriate assertion; and (6) personality types. Two recurring situations and the wrong and right ways to handle the political aspects are described. Part 2 offers analyses of situations in which an individual participates regularly at work where political behavior is a natural part of the process: attending meetings, experiencing delegation, and going to social events involving work colleagues. Part 3 focuses on political skills development. Subject areas are conflict resolution, life stages recognition, identifying hindering people and gaining support. The book concludes with a list of tips and 13 references for further reading. (YLB)

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HANDLING OFFICE POLITICS

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Achieving the Most From This Book

The objective of *Handling Office Politics* is for you to develop an action plan in order to enhance your personal situation at work. For this to be achieved, you need to check thoughtfully your learning goals about this subject.

Below is a checklist to help you define them.

Action: Underline, circle or highlight what is most applicable to you. Please complete it **NOW**, as the exercise will help you to focus on what is important to you in the study of political behaviour at work while you are reading and using the contents.

- I want my relationships with people at work to improve
- I want to experience less tension and anxiety caused by interactions with work colleagues which disadvantage me
- I want to improve those skills required to implement my career action plans
- I want to understand why people often behave differently at work than in social settings
- I want to break through the constraints which appear to be limiting my career progress
- I want to avoid repeating past career setbacks which were unrelated to performance of my work tasks

HANDLING OFFICE POLITICS

Part One: Political Activities At Work

More people need to understand that employment life is a game—albeit a very serious one. Competence, loyalty and long hours of work alone will not advance your career. The basic nature of business is competitive, and political behaviour at work is one of the keys to advancement.

How to play the game and emerge a winner rather than a loser, requires detailed study, advice from reliable sources and an acceptance that the good jobs will also be coveted by fellow employees—yes, career advancement is frequently at the expense of others. How you participate in office politics determines who will help, hinder or resent you.

Career-wise people ensure that their preparation for career action steps is thorough, that data is gathered before making decisions, and that their career planning is regularly revised as new information and circumstances dictate.

Political behaviour at work seems to me to be a proudly acknowledged skill when our careers are advancing satisfactorily, but a denigrated feature of employment when we suffer a setback.

A significant number of my clients express annoyance and frustration when they are the victims of adverse events within their employment environments. I have no hesitation in sharing that my counselling work is as much about helping people adjust to the social system of employment life, as about helping clients to choose between career-related alternatives.

Whenever people gather, politics are created—and this is very much in evidence in work environments. Unfortunately, many people are either insensitive to the political behaviour of fellow employees or seek ways in which they can avoid it, often to the detriment of their careers.

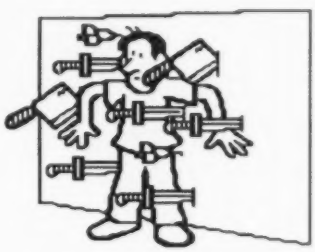
Participation in political behaviour is risky but necessary, unless you have chosen to plateau your career or take hazardous risks with relations with your employer.

If we reflect for a moment that managing our careers is as much about our ability to handle interactions with other people as about choosing the right occupation with the right employer at the right time, then the existence of office politics seems normal and rational. The trouble is our school teachers and/or tertiary education lecturers have not only failed to mention its existence but also provided no training in how to manage the process.

There is nothing mysterious about why office politics occur—it is simply another phrase for interpersonal relationships which develop when people congregate in one location on a regular basis, such as being employed by the same organisation.

Career Setbacks

Career setbacks should stimulate us to ask whether our work and personal lives are as we would like them to be, to determine what actions are required to enhance both and then get on with implementing them. Inactivity, or dwelling too long on feeling the victim of circumstances, is not fulfilling our obligation to manage our own careers. We are being unrealistic if we expect our employers to improve them for us.



Losing out in a merger or take-over, being passed over for promotion because of the enmity of a boss, or being beaten by a more politically forward person to a reward we have coveted, all demand special strengths from us. How to persist in an unfair world when situations seem out of our control is the kernel of office politics. It is on these occasions that we need to know how to act politically and recover quickly from our disadvantages.

If you wait forlornly to be rescued from a setback, you may be left waiting for a long time. If you vow to be single-minded, focus your efforts on adopting attitudes which preserve your pride and self-belief, and search for alternative career goals to accomplish, your 'down time' will be considerably shorter. Once you have worked out your revised worklife goals, you can assess who may help or hinder your achievement of them. Then promote your

case with a new sense of purpose and take care to disassociate yourself from those of questionable competence or integrity.

To create emotional distance and say "I am stopping caring about my job" is highly likely to result in a repetition of career setbacks. To act positively is sensible, pragmatic and politically wiser.

Career Setbacks

Action: Circle, underline or highlight all you have experienced

poor performance appraisal ... job application rejection ... made short list but not job offer ... retrenched ... work colleague told tales ... flirtation at office became widely known ... experienced anxiety attacks at work ... insomnia ... lost enthusiasm for Mondays ... inadequate salary review ... ignored office politics and suffered ... sexually harassed ... failed probationary period ... lost out on training course selection ... learnt about attractive transfer opportunity too late ... made redundant ... observed taking home office stationery supplies ... damaged company car ... fell out with General Manager's secretary ... read negative notes about myself on boss's desk ... did not make sales quota ... did not confirm boss's onward reservations ... acted silly at company-organised function ... selection interviewer talked too much about self ... a bad reference ... career burnout ... career boredom ... career path blockage ... experienced reverse discrimination ... report returned marked 'unsatisfactory' ... fell asleep at a meeting ... exceeded budget ... salary decreased ... employment agent disclosed my job search ... dead-end job ... regarded as 'over-qualified' ... own business failure ... overheard denigrating my boss ... employer promises unfulfilled ... misinformed about reality of job ... victim of office politics ... fired! ... spotted falsifying expenses ... lost a good boss ... lost addresses of business contacts ... concluded chose wrong career ... became 'chained' to my job title ... company relocation caused extended commuting ... current employer heard I was looking around ... reluctant to delegate ... caught doing too many 'foreign orders' during office hours ... didn't get on with own job, but meddled in others' ... fell out with the directors ... changes in company policy reduced career opportunities

Action: Recall how you recovered. Would you act differently now? How? What do you need to learn more about to prevent their recurrence ? Write your responses to these questions.

The areas of self-study necessary to enable you to manage your own way effectively amidst office politics are:

- Interpersonal Relationships
- Thinking Politically
- The Grapevine
- Competition Among Work Colleagues
- Appropriate Assertion
- Personality Types

Interpersonal Relationships

The alert, career-conscious person acknowledges the existence of office politics and sets out to study the nature of interpersonal relationships. By acquiring an understanding of why people behave the way they do, you should be able to adjust your behaviour and influence events to favour, rather than disadvantage, your career progress.

Those who have not given attention to increasing their skills in interpersonal relationships often have considerable difficulty improving their worklife situation. Hard work and a virtuous image alone may not advance a career or change things to enrich our worklife.

Our work satisfaction depends on the extent to which we find adequate outlets for our abilities, interests, personality and values as each of these changes throughout our adulthood. It depends on finding the type of work, work situation and way of life in which we can fulfil the kind of role we find congenial and which meets our needs for personal growth.

As we fulfil our role, so do others, but often with different sets of motivations. A collision course is inevitable if we do not learn how to steer our career paths skilfully. The process of managing our careers is essentially that of developing effective relationships with others. This cannot occur in isolation unless we are the only person on the payroll. The nature of work activity—other than lighthouse keeping or dingo fence mending—demands that people interact continuously with each other face-to-face or by telephone, fax, computer and at meetings.

> ☛ Office politics is about power and influence —its acquisition, its loss, and its retention.

Politics at work is about power and interpersonal relationships. Where two or more people focus on problems in order to make and implement decisions, coalitions are formed. Rarely do these coalitions remain static. Consequently the social forces that are involved in these interactions form the kernel of worklife politics.

The essence of the political contract between two or more people is: "I'll support your efforts if you'll support mine." This needs to be achieved without creating antagonism. It's not necessary to be friendly with everyone, but at least seek neutrality, not outright hostility, if support cannot be secured from relevant work colleagues.

Thinking Politically

Beverley L. Kaye, in her most impressive book, *Up Is Not The Only Way To Go,* suggests clear approaches to thinking politically. Such thinking may involve:

Visibility	Making sure that accomplishments become well known, by sending memos, circulating reports, making presentations at meetings.
Attention	Getting the ear of people who are in positions of influence and power.
Association	Forming friendships and networks with valuable contact people at lunches, seminars, conferences.
Information	Gathering inside information from such diverse sources as secretaries, auditors, managers.
Aspirations	Making career advancement ambitions known to those who can assist.

- Demonstration Finding opportunities to demonstrate abilities by volunteering for committee assignments, special projects, oral presentations.

Beverley warns that to ignore office politics is a myopic view which can hinder the progress of those who are planning to achieve career goals. "Only by recognising, studying and understanding the internal political system can they take advantage of the opportunities it affords."

Determined career strategists learn where to voice their ideas so they are implemented and not left to wither and die. They know when it is possible to let someone else move on their behalf. They know that changes in an organisation rarely occur because of their actions alone. Change requires the support of several people who feel that the change might bring some good for them as well.

Grapevine Information

The grapevine, or office gossip where you work, is very important for you in protecting and advancing your career. It is a key source of information about the informal power structure that operates within your organisation. As people continually make, undo and remake alliances, coalitions and deals for mutual help within the world of work, your awareness of the current gossip is very useful.

If you neglect to pay attention to it you will not know whom you need to ask for advice or recruit to help get things done. This will invariably affect your ability to maintain proficient performance of your job tasks. The grapevine can inform you with whom it is best for you to spend time in order to establish a relationship which you can influence in your favour.

Humour those who contribute to the flow of grapevine information. It is not essential that you feed data into it, but it doesn't cost anything more than a little time to be a good listener.

> ☛ Some have power because of the seniority of their position, others because of their role, such as secretary, gatekeeper, or canteen staff member. The first is formal power, the others informal power.

Competition Among Work Colleagues

Becoming discomforted by the amount of competition at work is a feature of worklife which bothers many people. This can be very worrying when it reduces your capacity to work effectively.

Many believe that career success can be measured only in terms of increased responsibility and higher pay and status. They think that only these can produce work satisfaction. This belief often causes them to compete aggressively with their work colleagues.

Strategies For Your Career Path Direction

When UP is your intended way:

- Acquire experience in more than one function
- Acquire experience in more than one product or service
- Participate in a major management school course
- Gain knowledge and practice in **marketing** and **financial management**
- Turn around a failing situation within the organisation

Strategies For Your Career Path Direction

When up is NOT your intended way:

- Acquire useful learning experiences at work
- Gain knowledge of whole organisation, not one department
- Get access to informal communication channels
- Be visible to decision makers
- Seek inclusion in task group or project team
- Participate as committee member of professional association related to the services and/or products of your employer
- Gather worthpoints for recording in your résumé

A growing number of people, however, are more interested in the quality of their living. They are seeking ways to make their work, careers, leisure interests and personal development contribute equally to this.

You must find your answer to this critical dilemma in order to cope better with behaviour at work that is not cooperative. Some put off this self-assessment until a crisis in their personal life, or employment circumstances, prompts a hurried review.

Until employers adopt personnel procedures that accommodate the competent performer intent on working assiduously at their current job rather than campaigning for higher responsibilities and more power, survival as a non-competitor at work will remain difficult. The market competition between organisations has spilled over to produce an over-stimulated competition *within* them. If this internal competition were out in the open everyone could deal with it better, unfortunately most is covert.

If maintenance of your current position is your goal, you must acknowledge that you need the goodwill and cooperation of your colleagues in order to get your job done well. This requires that you spend time communicating with them intelligently. You may need to help them understand why it is in their own self-interest to help you when required.

Work is a series of alliances with work colleagues which continually form, break up and re-form. To ignore this is not being unambitious but simply foolish. Friendly teamwork and continuing harmonious relationships are an unrealistic expectation in worklife, an expectation that fails to acknowledge that people are essentially self-seeking in their behaviour.

> ☛ Doing well at office politics can count more than the quality of your work performance. The challenge is to do both to a high standard.

Appropriate Assertion

The negative effects of office politics can be minimised if we are able to communicate with people without misunderstandings and object effectively when an action or statement is made which could set back our career or the feelings of others towards us. If you have come away from a confrontation at work feeling that things were left unsaid or unclear, or that you were tricked, used or made to feel guilty, then you need to develop your skills at appropriate assertion.

These skills can be studied either through

- selected reading;
- with a counsellor on a one-to-one basis; or
- within a small group training environment.

Many employers include assertiveness training as part of their training course offerings to staff. In addition, there are many community-based organisations which can provide this skills development training at a reasonable cost.

To be effective at appropriate assertion, you **must** practise applying the skills you have studied. The more you practise, the more readily you will apply them when the need arises, and in a comfortable, confident manner.

Being assertive is a way of going about interactions or confrontations. It is not a means of getting your own way on every occasion, nor of winning a battle of words against another. Appropriate assertion is the way in which you approach

Appropriate assertion is the way in which you approach interactions, remain in charge of yourself during the process and influence the outcomes in a positive way for **all involved**.

Appropriate assertion should not be confused with aggressive behaviour which is domineering, self-centred and without regard for the feelings of others. This hinders effective interpersonal relations because it does not allow openness and is unreceptive. The opposite of aggressive behaviour, the style known as being passive, does not contribute either as it involves sublimating your needs and feelings in order to satisfy other people.

Personality Types

It would be a false assumption to regard only the dominant and ambitious people as being capable of skilful office politics. The self-motivated person who cares less for power than the attainment of self-set goals can be just as proficient in its usage. The 'office friendly'—the person with an obvious desire to be liked by all, but often quickly dismissed—is frequently more adept than the former two personality styles at surviving well at work.

So, skill at office politics is not restricted to particular personality types but more to those astute employees who acknowledge it as a fact of life and study how to manage their fate, not surrender to it.

Let's examine briefly two recurring situations where there is a right way and a wrong way to handle the political aspects.

- **The Incompetent Supervisor**

Being assigned to a supervisor who is not a competent performer can be very frustrating. There is a danger that if your supervisor doesn't have high standards you may adjust yours downwards in order not to disturb your relationship with them. Alternatively, you may decide to resign, when staying with the employer would be the better course to follow, provided that you assessed your position carefully and adopted a suitable course of action.

Before you act, consider that this may be an opportunity to show those in higher positions—particularly those in positions of

This is actually easier when you are supervised by an incompetent supervisor.

A wrong move politically would be to behave disloyally or take underhand actions like routing your work around your boss to higher levels. Experience has taught me that an incompetent supervisor is well known to others higher in the organisation. They take care to pay special attention to that unit or department in order to protect their own reputations and business interests. They are more aware of the employees than you may realise.

In such a situation you can be very visible. To perform better than others in a demoralised department requires only your determination to do so. It's a precious career progress sign which reads 'green' for you to get in charge of your fate and excel. Your reward should not be long in arriving.

- **Criteria For Promotion**

Whether you are in your twenties or older it is a rare employment environment that will advance your cause without you yourself attempting to discover the real criteria for promotion. Duty statements, essential and desirable credentials and vacancy descriptions reveal some of these. Keen career-wise people go a few steps further. They carry out information interviews with those in the positions they are considering, or in positions similar to them.

> ☛ Information interviewing is the best way to bring career research into specific career goals. Real people and personal insights enhance any available information in print.

Information interviewing is not the same as job interviews. It is gathering facts and building networks.

Keen career strategists look for problems in the organisation to which they might contribute solutions; they identify and cultivate the most useful people; they seek their counsel; they seek their support.

Information interviewing is:

- a method of building your network;
- finding a mentor and/or sponsor;
- finding out what really matters when carrying out different jobs;
- recruiting contacts for promoting your case; and
- getting the information to decide among alternative career action steps.

Few will not respond to a politely worded request along the lines of: "I need the support of your knowledge and experience. I am not sure you can give me all the data I need but you may be able to suggest someone who can."

A self-defeating, and politically unwise, course of action would be to complain to co-workers that your talents are being ignored. Inevitably reports of your views will travel and at some stage be regarded negatively rather than acted upon positively.

To manage your career well, you must be appropriately active—not simply reactive—to what others decide or choose for you. Find time to probe diplomatically.

The contents of your job description are not cemented in stone. Those who work solely to its contents will miss important clues for advancement. Those who do search and find them are more likely to be rewarded for their initiative.

Understanding Office Politics

Action: Consider each of these statements. Decide which are **TRUE**, which are **FALSE**. Reflect on your worklife experiences to help you form your opinion. Discuss your opinions with your mentor, career counsellor or other training course participants.

- Power and politics is nasty business. Only the untalented, incompetent and perverse ignore them
- Only people in staff management are in a position to gain and keep power
- On balance, hard work is less important to success than are power and politics
- Power within organisations is not unfair
- Company functions such as staff parties and dinners are important political and power occasions
- The closer you get to colleagues, the more involved you become in their goals and needs, the more likely you are to get cooperation from them when you need it
- Your professional skills and knowledge are an important political and power tool
- On the job nearly every one is a role player
- Advancement does not always have a direct relationship to productivity and creativity
- In advancing your career you are more at risk from envious peers than from bosses
- A good form of career self-defence is to maintain a written record of your work accomplishments

Action: Discuss your opinions with your mentor, career counsellor or other training course participants.

Action: If you found your discussions useful, continue with the statements below:

- Proposing the benefits to your listener and the organisation is the best way to secure a career advancement
- People are not too unpredictable to learn how to get along with them
- Conflict is a daily reality for everyone
- When using the confrontation strategy in resolving conflict, the negotiation approach allows both people to win whereas use of the power strategy results in one losing
- Office politics determines who will get ahead
- It is generally unwise to be open and trusting in relationships at work
- Fewer people are terminated from their employment because of interpersonal office politics than because of poor work performance
- The game of office politics is pretty much the same no matter where you work
- One should go after job tasks that provide an opportunity to make you more positively visible within the organisation
- It is possible to learn how to say "No" firmly to supervisors and/or colleagues and not create resentment
- Assessing the implications of changes in organisational structure is important

Part Two: Situational Analysis

There are situations in which you participate regularly at work where political behaviour is a natural part of the process. They are:

- Attending Meetings
- Experiencing Delegation
- Social Events Involving Work Colleagues

Attending Meetings

The spoken word is well known to be more effective in communicating than the written word. This means meetings need to be held. A successful meeting can build goodwill, improve morale and gain staff cooperation in solving problems and getting action. Yet a poor meeting risks multiplying misunderstandings, dissatisfaction and dysfunctional behaviour among those attending.

Meetings do provide an opportunity to clarify written communications which may have caused confusion or unrest. They are also useful to obtain feedback on matters which could impede efficiency.

Meetings provide an opportunity to save time by introducing new employees, discussing changes to current procedures, examining new equipment and proposals from outside services or suppliers, and illustrating or checking the overall progress being made towards the objectives of organisational units. They should not be considered a concession to organisational imperfection.

The major problem, though, is the danger of too many meetings or too long meetings caused by the political inclinations or behaviour of those attending.

The human dynamics of meetings are so complex that meetings become risky facilities for getting any work done or agreement reached. In addition, participants in meetings are not accessible to subordinates, customers, suppliers or clients. New business

can be jeopardised and contacts frustrated by the far too frequent: "Ms Stewart is in a meeting—can I take a message?"

A number of factors are known to reduce the risk of meetings being a costly waste of time. The most important are your attitude and political behaviour at a meeting.

Are you sometimes guilty of being the 'talk machine' who has something to say on every item, or the 'silent one' who has valuable things to say but fails to share ideas at the appropriate time?

Perhaps you have been guilty of being the 'argument maker' who just loves to debate and play power games, and frequently causing diversions from the proper resolution of problems. To ridicule suggestions, ideas, comments, is the favoured style of the 'suggestion squelcher'. This will discourage the sharing of thoughts by others which may well help the agenda to progress efficiently.

Even if you don't recognise yourself among these descriptions, you are highly likely to know fellow participants at your meetings who do fit them.

Take the person aside, explain that their style is inhibiting the process, and suggest that a change in behaviour would be more pragmatic as a career protection strategy. It is in their interest to modify their style. Pointing out where the individual may come to career harm is a better tactic than simply complaining that the behaviour irritates you.

I consider the regularly scheduled meeting which occurs within organisations every week or month the most irrational meeting of all. Here the participants frequently think up items simply to reduce the danger of being regarded as a non-contributor if they don't say anything. Better to keep silence than protract the time needlessly. Allow the meeting to end when genuine issues have been concluded and use the time fruitfully for other matters.

Whether you are the chairperson or a meeting participant there are steps you can take to rectify waste of time and disruptive behaviour. As an incentive for following them, calculate the

hourly remuneration of your meeting colleagues and then work out the actual cost of the next meeting you attend.

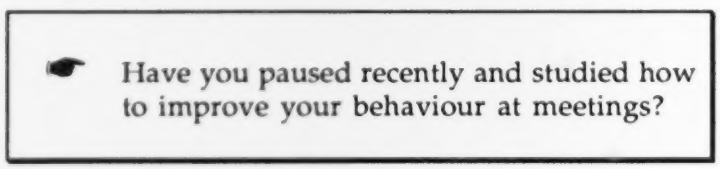
If you are the chairperson, ask yourself the reason for these regular meetings. If you can't find one, ask your colleagues, and if they fail to proffer a sensible reason then cancel the next scheduled one.

Even if a good reason can be found, cancel the next one anyway and evaluate what real harm is caused. If little, maintain this flexible attitude towards meetings. If staff complain there is insufficient interpersonal interaction, suggest they meet for that purpose after work in the local bar or some venue of their choice and you fund half the costs of the first two occasions.

If the meetings you attend currently do not have an agenda, circulate one in advance, specifying who is to come prepared to respond to particular items. State the start and conclusion times and do your best to keep to them. A meeting should always begin on time, or everyone will eventually turn up late.

There are two failures on the part of meeting participants that are most damaging to their careers: the failure to build on what has been said previously; and the failure to listen well and interpret accurately what is being implied as well as said. A further major fault are meetings where, at the end, there is no attempt to clarify issues or secure commitment to what each participant will do as a result of the meeting's resolutions. The sad fact of life is that this neglect frequently results in the need for yet another meeting to clarify why desired events didn't happen, prompting political behaviour of a defensive and negative kind.

For most, skill at meetings, either as a participant or chairperson, is a critical ability for ensuring career success. It will not improve unless attention is focused on improving it.



Experiencing Delegation

The art of delegation is also a critical strategy for career protection which many resist spending time to improve. They resist because they are unsure how to delegate, or are uncertain of their superior's attitude if they do. Feeling their subordinates are not capable, coupled with the fear that inferior performance would reflect on their own career situation, is another frequent form of resistance.

Some claim "I'm the best person to do this particular task; no one else can possibly do the job as well." Others delegate but do not equip the other person with sufficient authority, resources or guidance to complete the delegated task properly. Sometimes it is quite clear that the subordinate being delegated to lacks the necessary background or experience to have a realistic chance of carrying out the assigned task. These situations are political behaviour at its most harmful.

You will often be in the position where you are delegated to unfairly or are delegating work tasks to other people. Hence it is a worklife process which deserves your attention and study.

Delegation requires hard work and involves unavoidable risks. It is easier to argue "I can do it better" or "I enjoy doing this task". But pause to consider both yourself and your subordinates. Everyone requires opportunities to extend their skills and thereby enjoy personal growth in the process.

Work dissatisfaction is heightened where tasks have become mundane and easy to do. By delegating you treat yourself better as well as those whose development you are responsible for, a task implied inextricably by your title as their manager.

When you look out solely for yourself there is only one person supporting you. By helping others you recruit more helpers for your career.

The risk that accompanies delegation often pays off in ways you'd rarely predict, often to your advantage. It is frequently the manager whose subordinate is capable of succeeding in the boss's position who gets promoted. For the subordinate to have a

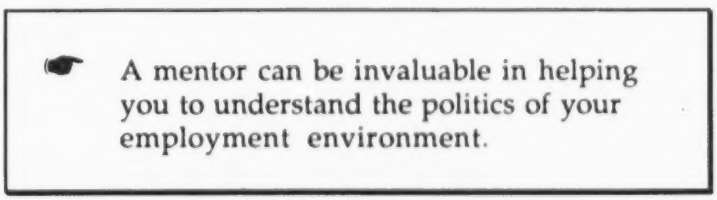
chance to demonstrate this potential the manager must first delegate skilfully those assignments which will facilitate this.

Clear briefing must be given which provides sufficient authority for the subordinate to carry out the assignment responsibly. Delegation is more than the assignment of specific responsibilities to a subordinate. You must also give the authority to carry out those responsibilities, and hold the person responsible for the wise use of that authority.

However, accountability can never be delegated. The manager, willingly or not, always retains accountability for the performance of members of the work unit. Senior management will rarely accept that subordinates are to blame when errors occur.

There's a real art in giving orders that are thoroughly understood and, what is more important, will be carried out conscientiously and cheerfully. It is not a stern edict.

Every task delegated, however small, must be accompanied by a discussion with the subordinate during which timetables are agreed, impediments to achievement examined, and clarification of the desired results fully appraised by the two people involved. This is not 'over-supervising', it is commonsense. In the way the subordinate learns more of the boundaries within which the assignment is to be carried out, can seek aid or clarification before, rather than during, execution, and the manager reduces the risk of the outcome reflecting badly on the delegater.



Delegation will not always go smoothly. In fact, as the skills of delegation are refined, subordinates may get you into a lot of trouble. But the alternative is also risky. To try to do everything yourself will result in neglect of other managerial responsibilities, added strain, and the image to others of a dedicated but silly 'workaholic'. The latter may cause you to feel that you are being acknowledged as conscientious when, in fact, all that you are earning is the contempt of your colleagues.

Consider also the likelihood of feelings of frustration within your subordinates. The latter are assigned to you to increase their range of skills and experiences in order to solve recurring and new problems; if they don't, you are a manager in name only.

When we have advanced through the battlefield of career pitfalls and inevitable setbacks to be appointed a manager it is the time to stop 'doing things'. We will also need to find more time to invest in office politics, liaise with colleagues, check out what really is going on and, in other words, gossip skilfully than we did in previous positions.

Time spent on tasks that subordinates can do, and will benefit by doing, will impede these activities. Our previous efforts have earned us the right to apply our talents to different things and, most critically, a different way of working. Otherwise the career journey has not been worthwhile, whatever the status and financial rewards achieved in its accomplishment.

Pause for a moment and reflect on your past managers. It is likely that your reflections will dwell on those who gave you chances, who won your regard and appreciation, who with their help and delegated assignments, albeit for their own purpose, enabled you to reach your current position. Give your subordinates today the opportunity to think well of you in the future.

Social Events Involving Work Colleagues

Consider the consequences before ... not when it's too late!

Part Three: Political Skills Development

- Conflict Resolution
- Life Stages Recognition
- Identifying Hindering People and Gaining Support

Conflict Resolution

Political behaviour is characterised by negotiation and compromise. A workable compromise involves discriminating between those items in a series of demands which are ultimately important to you and those which, while being pleasant to achieve, do not matter all that much.

In making a compromise, begin by foregoing those requirements which are not all that important to you but which may be providing a good deal of difficulty for the other person. Ask them to do likewise for you. In the end, an effective compromise should take into account a few items which really mean a lot to both of you and which you are able to permit each other without feeling resentful or undermined. Obviously the degree of satisfaction with the different compromises will vary but this general approach will tend to lead to a greater number of workable outcomes.

More interpersonal skills teaching is required to help employees to cope with conflict of this nature at work. Staff development resources could be better spent by many employers on such topics as appropriate assertion, negotiation and conflict resolution, the nature of individual differences, the effect of colour of clothes on others, and body language interpretation.

When in-company training in these interpersonal communication techniques is absent, seminars and workshops promoted and conducted outside the organisation are extremely well attended. Their success proves the demand for such knowledge.

Learning about the nature and causes of conflict; how to concentrate on building our own power rather than competing with others' power; learning how to say "No" without multiplying our 'enemies', are skills we need to learn and apply daily in our employment environment.

Career Hazards For Conscientious Employees

1. **Unable to manage your manager skilfully**: What your boss regards as desired performance counts more than your job description. If in doubt, find out!
2. **Failing to think strategically**: Focusing on detail may result in not seeing how your work fits in with that of your colleagues. Don't neglect work which helps them as well as you.
3. **Over-the-top ambition:** Being competitive is important and will get you noticed. But standing out too much as an individual will produce resentment and could be counterproductive to advancing your own career.
4. **Insensitivity to others**: Listen to what is **not** being said, as well as what is. 'Hidden agendas' at work cause the same damage as computer viruses in software—neither is easy to detect, but both can sabotage otherwise earnest work.
5. **Over-dependence on mentors or sponsors:** The value of your informal advisers about the career action steps you are planning is to challenge your ideas, not to tell you what to do. Like fertilisers they should be changed regularly.
6. **Clinging to past roles**: Each job content change, whether a transfer or promotion or a new employer, demands different behaviour and personal style. Triple check you have adjusted to suit the changed circumstances both of your job content and your employment environment.
7. **Solo running**: When problems are really difficult, don't hesitate to recruit help from others. Better to find a successful solution as part of a team, than be a loser who tried alone.
8. **Breaching trust**: Failure to follow through on promises to others jeopardises organisational efficiency. Also, people who can assist your career reduce in number if you do this more than once.
9. **Liking everybody**: In reality this is impossible, so don't pretend. But do demonstrate respect for technical competence in others. Your words—spoken and written—should reflect this consistently in your communications at work.

Action:

- Reflect on your past six months' work experiences.
- Underline, circle or highlight those of the nine hazards which are relevant to your situation and you are now determined to change.

Life Stages Recognition

Skilful political behaviour involves learning and using your knowledge of what other employees want. The ways in which you do or don't contribute to satisfying their wants are the ways you behave politically. What do you pay attention to in others? When you use your attention shrewdly others will do more of what you want and less of what you don't. For instance, when a colleague is angry, ask questions. This is a useful method to defuse the negative emotion in the interaction.

☛ Watch for what people are cynical about. This often reveals what they deeply wish they had.

As skill at office politics is based mainly on personal interactions it is important to gain insight into another person's personality, career stage and life roles. This requires a sustained effort to learn about others and use this knowledge when communicating with them.

Personality types generally remain constant over time. Once assessed, you can often predict how the person is likely to react to an interaction you are planning with them. This can prompt you to adjust your style and content of approach in order to bring about satisfactory results.

Career stages refer to a cycle which most people go through often without realising it. It has four stages: Exploration, Advancement, Maintenance and Decline. It used to be thought that each stage was linked to a person's age but this is not

actually the case. A person aged 25 could be in the Decline stage as well as a person aged 53.

Life roles are about the personal situation of others—whether they are married, have children, have family commitments—and other similar aspects of adult living. These are situational factors which contribute to their personal needs and aspirations at different times in their lives. Again they are not age related.

A study of career stages and life roles is recommended and you should obtain two books I have written which explain Career Stages and Life Roles in detail. They are *Stop Postponing The Rest of Your Life* and *Career Transitions*. Improved teamwork and effective interactions are more likely to benefit you, if you have allocated time to their study.

Identifying Hindering People and Gaining Support

It is useful to identify your network of current or potential helpers whether for advice or influencing others on your behalf. It is also politically wise to identify those who could hinder your career. This may be a non-supportive boss, a critical work colleague, a manager in another department. These people you will know well.

There are, however, others within your organisation who could hinder your career because they do not know your work well or about your career ambitions. It is important to compile a list of people under these categories. When you are setting out to secure the support of others it is important to identify in what ways you can contribute to their goals. We progress further with our careers when we diligently follow this rule of reciprocity.

When you help others meet their goals and fulfil their needs you are being astute politically. Our tendency is to focus on what others can, can't or won't do for us. When we help others to win they are more likely to be positively inclined to help us with our goals.

Identifying Obstacles — Gaining Support

Action: Use the headings below and compile three lists of names and proposed actions.

List 1:

- People in my network
- How can they help me meet my goal?
- How may I help them?

List 2:

- People who could help me but don't know my goal
- People with whom they can connect me
- How might I help them when they have helped me?

List 3:

- Hindering people where I work
- What can I do to obtain their support?

Summary

Career management is going to be characterised more and more by sideways moves, and even deliberately self-initiated downward career path transitions. The vertical model that upwards is the only way to go has been assumed by too many for too long an appropriate career direction for all throughout their career life or the only choice to follow. Career transitions of this different nature call for heightened skills in the art of office politics in order to convince those in positions of power to facilitate them.

To ignore the career strategy of politics, to neglect seeking out skills-building experiences in interpersonal relations, could jeopardise the journey to improved well-being and the feeling of being more in charge of your own career whichever career direction you choose. Remember, many careers flounder simply because the individual does not try to build support for them or plan how their aspirations are to be achieved.

Politics Are Real—and Essential

Politics at work are basically neither good or bad; they are to do with as we will. Their goodness or badness flows from the intent and the impact of our political actions. We must take care that respect for the individuality of others should be maintained. Politics are the basis of trust and distrust, loyalty and undermining, giving and withholding, contact and avoidance.

Without the formal and informal political systems that exist within an organisation, it would come to a halt. Or, perhaps, because of the formal and informal political systems, it **has** come to a halt. Both cases demonstrate the power and importance of politics to organisations.

Eliminating politics, if that were possible, would mean eliminating the advance warning you get from an associate in another department—which they are not really supposed to give you. It would mean not being able to line up support for a proposal before an upcoming meeting. It would mean no more chats with your boss's boss's boss about the direction of your department and how they see your possible role.

Whether you are on the receiving end of these political benefits or not, you can imagine how each of them can help the organisation and its members function more effectively.

Keep these tips in mind:

- Acknowledge the reality of politics.
- Accept that they are essential and will not disappear.
- Work hard to understand them.
- Recognise that you are unavoidably a part of the politics by being an employee.
- Act within this political framework in knowledgeable ways.
- Research, practise and develop the skills required to be a part of them.

Note to Myself

Action: As a result of reading and thinking about the contents of this book I am going to:

Recommended Further Reading

Career Karate, Tom Carney, Methuen, New York, 1983

Create Your Own Career Opportunities, Signe A. Dayhoff, Brick House Publishing, Andover, USA, 1987

Information Interviewing; What it is and how to use it in your Career, Martha Stoodley, Garrett Press, Maryland, USA, 1990

The Invisible War: Pursuing Self-interests at Work, S Cutbert and J McDonagh, Wiley Press, New York, 1980

Mastering the Meeting, Jenny Beaumont, Information Australia, Melbourne, 1987

Sex In the Office: Power and Passion in the Workplace, Patrice and Jack Horn, Addision-Wesley, New York, 1982

Social Skills at Work, David Fontana, Rutledge, UK, 1990

Turf and Other Corporate Power Plays, Pamela Cumming, Prentice Hall, New York, 1985

Winning at Work, Paul Stevens, Edward Arnold/Hodder and Stoughton, Melbourne, 1987

Working In Organisations, Andre Kakabadse and Ron Ludlow, Grower Publishing, Brookfield, USA, 1987

Three useful titles from *The Fifty Minute Series* are obtainable from Career Builders, PO Box 1051, Springwood 4127. They are:

Successful Negotiation

Plan B: Protecting Your Career

Developing Positive Assertiveness

WORKLIFE titles can be used for:

- **Individual Study**: All you need is a quiet place and time and a pen. Both reading and recording your responses to various questions will contribute to self-learning.

- **Training Workshops**: WORKLIFE titles can be used as pre-session reading or as an assignment during the conduct of a training program.

- **Remote Location Training**: With many staff working in locations far from training centres WORKLIFE titles can be sent for use on-site where their career actions are most relevant.

WORKLIFE titles include:

The Australian Résumé Guide
Strategies for Dual-Career Couples
Planning For Me! Setting Personal Goals
Win That Job!
Stop Postponing the Rest of Your Life
Career Transitions
Career Management: Whose Responsibility?
Handling Office Politics
How to Network and Select a Mentor

WORKLIFE titles available from:

The Centre for Worklife Counselling
Suite One, 120-122 Prince Albert Street
Mosman Junction, NSW 2088, Australia
Tel: (02) 969.4548 Fax: (02) 968.1827

Handling Office Politics

The objective of *Handling Office Politics* is for you to develop an action plan in order to enhance your personal situation at work. All you need is a quiet place and time and a pen. Both reading and recording your responses will contribute to self-learning.

About the Author — Paul Stevens

After twenty-one years' employment experience as a Personnel Manager dealing with the problems of employer/employee relationships in the UK, Canada and Australia, Paul Stevens created The Centre for Worklife Counselling in 1980. His concern for individuals and their search for satisfaction in their work motivates his daily counselling and teaching activities, as well as his writing.

Paul has become nationally known as a counsellor, broadcaster and author of nineteen publications on worklife and career management issues.

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